

## ***Other Voices—***

# **Minto and Bush Justice**

*(Courtesy of Anchorage Daily News)*

Land claims or no land claims, Alaska's Natives feel a deep and long-harbored resentment against whites for many of the social ills that plague their culture.

This feeling surfaced like soreness in an old wound this week in the outspoken sessions of the Minto Justice in the Bush Conference. By tying together the bonds of mutual discontent, the conference could very well be considered a benchmark in Native unification.

The site for the meeting itself was the curtain raiser to the bigger drama of Native poverty and avowed discrimination. Minto, 120 dusty dirt-road miles from Fairbanks, has no water or sewer system. A fire three weeks ago killed a resident before water could be hauled by bucket brigade.

The conference theme seemed to be that there was little justice in the bush. After a low-keyed beginning, the voices of 200 Native villagers became a loud hum of protest against inferior standards of police protection, education, and legal representation.

Like children falsely accused, rural Natives asked why they must live at the crushingly poor levels so far below white standards. Why must they send their children thousands of miles away from home for an education? "A miserable, lousy boarding home program," one Native woman called it in an intensely emotional speech; a program that splinters family relationships and cultural values.

The Natives protested a spotty system of police protection, which is often infected with cultural bias. Such discrimination, they said, has had regrettable results — drug use, alcoholism and delinquency among Native children.

Without much ado, the Native conference drove right to the heart of a serious and sorely neglected issue in the Alaskan outback: Too much cultural shock, too soon, too fast, and with too little preparation.

"We were never asked if we wanted this," said an Athabascan woman. "We were never asked if we could change our style of living from subsistence to welfare. We were never asked if we wanted this kind of education. It was laid upon us. . ."

The accusing finger was pointed at the state for its failure to provide the same standards for bush and urban areas. But the cultural burden fell to the non-Native who has tried to dominate the Natives by will rather than understanding. It is a sack full of insensitivity that would be difficult to unload. Perhaps it's time to listen and take note.

There were indications that the politicians who showed up to glad-hand the Natives and win their votes did not listen well. Reports from the Minto conference show that most candidates gave their stock political speeches, permitted no questions afterwards and stayed just long enough to be recognized. It was, indeed, a sorry statement about political concern and sincerity.

What did set this conference apart was the conviction behind the complaints. As a final move, a committee was established to see that standards are set and something is done. The conference itself resolved to take "positive action" toward better education and greater justice, instead of leaving it to someone else.

The Minto meeting deserves serious consideration, for it reached a jarring conclusion: The non-Native culture giveth little and taketh away much. It's a slap in the face, and it may be deserved.